

PUBLIC POLICIES CONCERNING EDUCATION AND POVERTY IN AMERICA

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I. INTRODUCTION

Only in the past few years has the reduction of poverty been recognized as a national problem which should be coped with by the American Federal Government. With the creation of the Office of Economic Opportunity and several special programs, the national government is now committed to support a country-wide "War on Poverty."

A significant portion of the new public programs is directed toward education or training programs to break the so-called "cycle-of-poverty" or eliminate the "poverty subculture" in which poverty is transferred from parents to children to grandchildren and so on. One goal is to provide both young and old workers with the skills and knowledge required to earn a more adequate income in a rapidly changing technology. Another is to "resocialize" the children by providing training in social skills and behavioral patterns which are congruent with a predominantly middle class society. For example, "Operation Headstart" provides special classes and learning opportunities for pre-school children from impoverished families to prepare them to adjust more easily to regular school classes and to be better prepared to compete with children from homes with more cultural and material advantages.

This paper identifies some of the problems encountered in using education as a tool to reduce poverty. After briefly exploring the nature of poverty groups, we will examine some of the relationships between educational achievement and income. This will be followed by a survey of the general attitudes of poverty groups toward educational achievement, and finally, implications of the findings for poverty programs will be summarized.

II. TENTATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

Poverty is a relative concept whose pertinency varies with the abilities, aspirations, and needs of a specific family in a particular environment at a given point in time. While few Americans are poor when compared with the citizens of "less developed" countries, a significant segment falls below the income level considered minimal in the United States today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the cost of a "modest but adequate" level of living (excluding taxes) for a working-

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class family of four persons in New York City was about \$5,200 in 1959 (in terms of 1961 purchasing power).¹ While this estimate may be considered higher than the national average, it does indicate the conservativeness of the figure of \$3,000 which we propose to use as the dividing line between poverty and non-poverty. We arbitrarily use \$3,000 because it covers the one-fifth of American families at the bottom of the income scale and can thus be correlated with other 1960 census data available on this group. Michael Harrington and others have also used similar income figures to show that 40-50 million Americans are living in poverty.² We are not directly concerned here with the exact precision of overall estimates of poverty since even rather conservative analyses indicate it is sufficiently widespread to constitute a problem for public policy.

This lack of concern with precise justifications for public involvement does not imply that humanitarian reasons are the only ones to be considered. Special educational programs to remove youths from a culture of poverty may lead to reduced costs of other public services associated with poverty areas (i.e., social welfare services, police activities, etc.). Professor Spergel observes that:

There is every reason to expect that the social, economic, and human costs of delinquency will skyrocket in the years ahead unless drastic remedies are undertaken. The growth of the youth population in low-income areas, the high rates of school failure and the large numbers of dropouts, and the increase of automation with its critical displacement of unskilled labor will accelerate the alienation of disadvantaged youths from the conventional norms of our society...³

Moreover, there is some implication in the existence of a significant number of unemployed or unemployable youths, that our normal educational programs are failing to fulfill their role in the development of human resources for the economic system. While high school dropouts are a special problem, even those youths with high school diplomas seem to be encountering increasing difficulties in obtaining and retaining employment. Many high schools are not providing the types of training

1 Cf. Herman P. Miller, *Rich Man, Poor Man* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1964) p. 82. Dr. Miller, is an economist in the U.S. Bureau of the Census. His data will be used extensively in our discussion of income.

2 Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963). See the Appendix for calculations.

3 Irving Spergel, *Racketville, Shantown, Haulburg: An Exploratory Study of Delinquent Subcultures* (University of Chicago Press, 1964) pp. 169-170.

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required by the terminal student seeking a job in business or industry today. Criticising the emphasis placed on college preparatory or general educational courses, Professor Wenrich reported that an estimated 880,000 of the 1,873,000 high school graduates of 1960 did not go on to college, but instead, most sought jobs. Because many lacked the required knowledge or skills to obtain positions, they only added to the unemployment figures. Wenrich asked for considerable curriculum and counseling improvements in the technical and vocational areas and warned that:

We must be unequivocally committed to the idea that the education of employment-bound youth is as important as the education of college-bound youth, for unless far more and far better education in the semi-professional, technical and skilled levels is soon made available to a greater number of citizens, the national economy and social structure will suffer irreparable harm.⁴

Because of the issues just raised, it can be assumed that special educational programs to ALLEVIATE poverty will sometimes be treating only the worst symptoms of more widespread ailments in the social structure.

While there is adequate evidence to demonstrate that, ON THE AVERAGE, more education of any type will bring higher income, lower income families are often the ones with the least interest in having their children obtain additional education. This negative attitude is a major obstacle to the use of education as a primary instrument for breaking the poverty chain leading from parents to children.

III. SOCIAL COMPOSITION OF POVERTY GROUPS

In 1959, there were 9,650,000 families who earned less than \$3,000 and who have thus been classified as "poor" or possessing "low-income status." Dr. Miller suggests that these families can be grouped into the following analytical categories:⁵

Farmers	1,570,000 families
Aged (65+)	2,581,000 "
Mother and Child	1,561,000 "
Nonwhite	950,000 "
All others	2,988,000 "

Although some of the categories can overlap, they do suggest various variables

4 Ralph C. Wenrich, (Speech given at the Conference on Supervision and Curriculum Improvement held at Columbia University, June 24, 1964.) Quoted in *The Ann Arbor News*, June 25, 1964

5 Miller, op. cit., pp. 64-66.

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related to poverty. For example, a female family-head usually cannot work full-time because of her children and she often lacks training that will bring in an adequate income. Or, being nonwhite may be associated with low occupational status because of racial discrimination or related factors. The "all others," category includes "white" minority groups, families whose chief wage-earner is disabled, younger men just getting started, unskilled workers, and so on. In some cases, low income status reflects not only a personal employment problem, but the economic deterioration of entire communities or regions.

These general categories for classifying poverty groups are similar to those developed by other writers. Harrington's "Other America" lists the unskilled laborers, migrant farm workers, old people, minority groups, and some smaller special groups (alcoholics, beatniks, etc.).⁶ The reasons why these groups became poor are varied, but prolonged exposure to economic deprivation often develops similar group attitudes of helplessness and of isolation from outside elements or groups. Consequently, poverty subcultures are created with social mores and aspiration levels which may deviate significantly from those of the larger society. We will return to this problem later.

IV. EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT AND INCOME STATUS

In this section, we stress the occupational or economic rather than the cultural or liberalizing rewards of education, since our primary concern is with providing an individual the skills necessary to earn an adequate income. Without the latter, he is not likely to be interested, or able to participate, in broader social or cultural activities. Consequently, a basic need in encouraging poorer youths to obtain more education is to satisfactorily demonstrate to them that education pays off in economic terms. Table I indicates the correlation between education and income for men 25 years of age or over in 1949 and 1959.⁷

TABLE I. Educational Level and Average Income

Education Completed	Average Income for Men Ages 25+	
	1949	1959
(Elementary)		
Less than 8 years	\$2,062	\$2,551
8 years	2,829	3,769

6 Harrington, *op. cit.*, passim.

7 Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

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(High School)		
9-11 years	3,226	4,618
12 years	3,784	5,567
(College)		
13-15 years	4,423	6,966
14+ years	6,179	9,206

Thus, all things being equal, each additional year of education does seem to provide more income. The chart also illustrates the value of completing the final year of high school or college and obtaining a diploma. The average high school GRADUATE received about \$900 more in 1959 than the student who failed to complete the full four years. Other data indicate that even in occupations where a high school education would not appear to be important (i.e., carpenters, truck drivers, or firemen) the annual earnings of a high school graduate may be \$500 or more above that of an elementary school graduate.⁸ Although a high school diploma is valuable, a college diploma is an even better investment. In 1959 the average college graduate could expect to earn about \$417,000 in his lifetime while the anticipated earnings of the average high school graduate were only \$247,000.⁹ The disadvantages of not having a high school or college diploma include not only the loss of potential income, but the exclusion from an increasing number of occupations. A high school diploma is being required for many positions where education was not previously considered so important (i.e., chauffers, janitors, etc.).

Impressive as the above data may be, they do not indicate that every impoverished youth can start making \$5,567 a year if he obtains a high school diploma. The figures in Table I are for men 25 years of age or over. Unemployment in recent years has been greatest among those UNDER 25. For example, in the 1958 economic recession, the family heads who experienced the highest rate of unemployment were those 18-24 years old. Those in the middle years were less affected because they were old enough to have established seniority in their jobs, but not so old as to be vulnerable because of advanced age. Family heads who were 55 years of age or over did not show a higher incidence of unemployment, but it is probable that they are less likely to be rehired once they become unemployed.¹⁰ It should be remem-

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 144-166.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹⁰ Wilbur J. Cohen, William Haber, and Eva Mueller. *The Impact of Unemployment in the 1958 Recession*. Report prepared for the Special Committee on Unemployment Problems, U.S. Senate. (U.S. Government Printing Office, June 1960) p. 21.

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bered, of course, that statistics on the "average man" are sometimes misleading. In spite of equal educational achievements, nonwhites do not fare as well as whites. Nonwhites are largely concentrated in the lower paid occupations and professions. Miller observes that in most occupations, nonwhites earn about three-fourths as much as whites with the same amount of schooling and that nonwhite high school graduates tend to earn less than whites who only complete the eighth grade.¹¹ In fact, the gap between white and nonwhite income widens as the educational level increases. "The fact is that in 1959, the average nonwhite with four years of college could expect to earn less over a lifetime than the white who did not go beyond the eighth grade."¹²

Nevertheless, in spite of obstacles like discrimination, education is still seen as one of the best avenues to higher economic and social status for youths from either minority or nonminority groups. In a study of Negro leaders in the South, Professor Thompson observed that many have almost a magical belief that when the educational level of Negroes becomes close to that of white people, nearly all personal and racial problems will disappear.¹³ While education has been a significant element in Negro progress, Thompson identifies several factors which result in the poorer Negro families having less zeal for it than their leaders. Negro schools are often poorly equipped, overcrowded and poorly staffed. Low family income and limited employment opportunities are other factors discouraging school attendance. Dropouts in southern high schools were estimated to be 500% higher among Negroes than among whites.¹⁴ The situation is improving as racial integration occurs in both Northern and Southern schools.

If poor groups, especially nonwhites, are not sufficiently motivated to acquire more education or are not rewarded on an equal basis for the education they do have, why should they push for increased education? It is certainly true that education is not enough; there must also be a reduction in discrimination and an increase in job opportunities. However, education or training is a necessary if not sufficient condition for those who seek a permanent gain in economic status. Although the untrained worker is hit hardest during recessions, even rapid economic growth can create problems for him:

Technological advancement, by its very nature, while creating a need for

11 Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

12 *ibid.*, pp. 142-145.

13 Daniel C. Thompson, *The Negro Leadership Class* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963) p. 141.

14 *ibid.*, pp. 142-145.

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new skills makes obsolete various ways by which men have been making their livelihood. Those ways of making a livelihood most affected are concentrated in the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations... The problem lies in the process of training and retraining for the skills which are constantly being created...¹⁵

V. LEVEL OF ASPIRATION AMONG POVERTY GROUPS

One of the important variables analyzed by Harrington in his study is aspiration level or desire to change. If a group has the will to improve, it can more rapidly overcome the barriers to improved economic status:

So it was in those ethnic slums of the immigrants that played such a dramatic role in the unfolding of the American dream... But the new poverty is constructed so as to destroy aspiration; it is a system designed to be impervious to hope. The other America does not contain the adventurous seeking a new life and land. It is populated by the failures, by those driven from the land and bewildered by the city, by old people suddenly confronted with the torments of loneliness and poverty, and by minorities facing a wall of prejudice.¹⁶

In a survey of attitudes toward the importance of various success symbols, some interesting differences were noted between lower and higher classes (defined in terms of occupational and educational attainment of the male head of the household). The ranking of first choices among six given symbols is shown in Table II.¹⁷

TABLE II. Class and Most Important Symbol of Success as Selected by Respondent (in Percentages)

	Class					Totals	
	Higher I	II	III	IV	Lower V	Per Cent	N
Education	61	37	30	26	21	29	63
Many friends	0	10	17	5	3	7	16

15 From the 1961 Report of the Joint Economic Committee of the Congress. Quoted in William P. Lineberry (ed.) *The Challenge of Full Employment* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1962) p. 139.

16 Harrington, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

17 Cf. E. H. Mizruchi, *Success and Opportunity: A Study of Anomie* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964) p. 72.

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Prestige	8	10	4	6	5	6	13
Job security	15	21	17	27	24	23	51
Home Ownership	8	16	32	31	41	31	70
Money	8	6	0	5	6	4	10
Totals	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
N	(13)	(19)	(47)	(81)	(63)		

For the lowest class, education is seen as slightly less important than job security and considerably less significant than home ownership. However, for the highest class, education is clearly the most important variable. The motivation of lower class youth to seek more education may thus require some demonstration that education is a way to obtain other goals which they consider more important. Also, the greater value placed on job security over money may diminish the appeal of the income aspects of educational achievement discussed earlier.¹⁸

The social and home environment of many poor youths is hardly conducive to development of positive attitudes toward education. Broken families, overcrowded homes and schools, low neighborhood moral standards, etc. are only a few of the variables associated with academic interest and performance. Reducing the harmful effects of this type of subculture on a young person may require programs which place the individual in a different and more positive environment for learning. Such programs as "Operation Headstart" and the "Job Corps" special training camps represent attempts to create temporary environments more conducive to personal growth.

VI. SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY FORMULATION

In this cursory review of education and poverty, we have encountered a wide range of problems whose amelioration will require an extensive national program. The Federal Government's new poverty program may be the primary focal point for a national effort but more state and local participation is also essential. We would offer the following tentative suggestions for consideration in the development of special educational projects for poverty groups.

1. In some "hard-core" poverty situations, it may be necessary to develop special programs which remove the children from negative influences prohibiting learning. This may raise moral questions about the proper role which the govern-

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 77.

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ment should play in family life. Nevertheless, public interference in domestic life may be justified when families are unable or unwilling to provide children with the necessary tools for functioning in a modern society.

2. The increased use of university students as individual or small-group tutors to deprived high school students should be explored. The SWAP project in New York and the "educational peace corps" developed by Dr. David Gottlieb at Michigan State University appear to have been rather successful in helping dropouts and other problem students continue their education.

Similar but more comprehensive efforts such as the "Harlem Domestic Peace Corps" should also be considered. This program, initiated in 1962 by President Kennedy's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency, includes 122 paid workers and 250 volunteers who provide recreational, educational, and occupational help for Harlem's 100,000 youngsters. They provide special tutoring, help find jobs, and conduct field trips to see museums, plays, or other activities which were formerly alien to many of the children. The staff itself is also recruited largely from within the Harlem area.¹⁹

3. Technical and vocational training programs must be closely coordinated with actual job opportunities in the particular community. As suggested earlier, many high school and college programs are failing to keep pace with the changes that have been occurring in the occupational structure. For example, opportunities are increasing in the professional, managerial, clerical, sales, and service occupations but declining in semi-skilled, unskilled, and agricultural positions.²⁰

4. In addition to providing normal job skills, the training and counseling efforts provided for many youths from poverty groups will have to include inculcation of the middle-class social values necessary for advancement in many firms. For example, the clerical programs of the Detroit Metropolitan Youth Center include classes on personal appearance, punctuality, etc.

5. The possibility of using the Armed Forces to provide vocational or other training needed by the general economy should also be explored. After basic military training is completed, young draftees might attend programs where they could learn useful skills and perhaps obtain academic recognition (i.e., through the awarding of high school equivalency certificates). In early 1966, the Department of Defense announced that it would start drafting youths who had been rejected

19 An Associated Press story on this program appears in *The Michigan Daily*, July 31, 1964.

20 Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

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previously for lack of education. They would then be given special courses in basic education to prepare them for regular military training programs.

6. Academic programs in many instances should be coordinated with supervised work experiences. The use of study-work programs improves self-confidence and work skills and it often makes the academic studies appear more meaningful to the student.

These are only a few of the possible approaches which must be coordinated with other programs for social welfare, juvenile delinquency, etc. to be effective. We will close with Wolfe's observations on making the best possible use of all of our human resources, including the disadvantaged members of our society:

A society which permits a significant portion of its members to work at levels below their capabilities is failing to achieve its full potential strength. The ability of a society to progress, the ability to better the goals for which it strives, and the skill and wisdom with which it meets its challenges are likely to be the decisive factors in determining its fate. The goals of a free society are determined by its members, and the wisdom of the society is the wisdom of its members. Thus a society can attain its full potential only when each of its members is enabled to contribute as fully as his individual abilities permit.²¹

²¹ Dael Wolfe, *American's Resources of Specialized Talents* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954) p. 137. Similar themes appear in Frederick Harbison and Charles A. Myers, *Manpower and Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book, Co., 1965) and Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1963).